

Recovering from the Emotional Aftermath of a Disaster

Disasters often strike with little or no warning. In an instant your home and community can be damaged or destroyed and forever changed. After a disaster, it is common to experience a wide range of reactions including changes in your thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Learning to understand your reactions can help you cope better and find healing. Following are answers to some questions you may be asking.

Why am I feeling the way I do?

Feelings of sadness, anger and grief are normal reactions to abnormal events such as disasters. You may not experience these feelings initially while your time and energy are consumed picking up the pieces and rebuilding. They may surface later. Here are some feelings you may be experiencing:

- Fear and anxiety, especially when things remind you of the disaster
- A sense of despair, hopelessness or emptiness
- Irritability and a short temper
- Frustration and resentment
- Feeling out of balance, easily upset or “just not yourself”
- Loss of interest in everyday activities.

I’m noticing changes in my behavior. Is that normal?

Changes in behavior also are normal reactions to traumatic events. Common behaviors may include:

- Isolating or withdrawing from others

- Keeping excessively busy to avoid the unpleasant affects of the disaster
- Avoiding activities, places or even people that remind you of the disaster
- Becoming overly alert or easily startled
- Having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- Increasing conflicts or tension with family members or others
- Crying or becoming tearful for no apparent reason
- Having an increase or decrease in your normal appetite
- Using alcohol more.

What about changes in thinking?

Disasters can affect people mentally. You may be experiencing:

- Trouble concentrating or remembering things
- Being easily distracted
- Difficulty making decisions
- Replaying the events and circumstances of the disaster in your mind
- Recurring dreams or nightmares
- Questioning your spiritual or religious beliefs

I’m overwhelmed. How can I cope with so much stress?

There are several things you and your family can do.

- Talk to others about how you are feeling and what you experienced. You need to express sadness, grief, anger and fear over what has happened and what you are facing.
- Don't overwork yourself. Take time off from repairs to be with your family. Make time for recreation, relaxation or a favorite hobby.
- Don't let yourself become isolated. Seek out and maintain connections with your community, friends, relatives, neighbors, co-workers or church members.
- Pay close attention to your physical health as prolonged stress can take a toll on your body. Maintain a good diet, get enough sleep and exercise regularly.
- Upsetting times can cause some people to use alcohol or drugs to cope with stress. In the long run, they will not help and will likely cause other problems.

How can I help my family cope better?

As much as possible families should maintain routines such as having regular meals together, engaging in enjoyable activities and other family rituals. This will help you feel that life still has some sense of order and normalcy.

- **Helping your spouse** – Couples need to tend to their relationship. Make time to be alone, talk about your feelings and have fun together.
- **Helping children** – Talk with children about their experiences and let them freely express their feelings. This is a confusing and frightening time for them. Pay attention to changes in their behavior and other signs that can indicate emotional distress. Some children may

withdraw while others will act out in anger. It is not uncommon for immature behaviors to reappear, such as bed-wetting or thumb-sucking. Children also may have nightmares or show their fear as symptoms of sickness. Accept their special needs by allowing them to become more dependent on you for a time and give them plenty of affection. For more information, see *Helping Young Children Cope With Trauma* online from the American Red Cross.

- **Helping the elderly** – Older family members will experience many of the same reactions as others, but there are some particular concerns they may have such as fears of declining health, becoming dependent or being institutionalized. Because of these fears, they may be reluctant to reveal the full extent of the disaster's impact. Reassure them by showing that you care and are available whenever they are ready to accept your help.

What expectations should I have?

It is important to be realistic about recovery. It probably will not be an easy or short-term process. You may be facing many challenges. Recognizing that you cannot control everything can help ease your stress, and setting realistic timeframes can increase your hope that life will again return to normal.

If your stress level becomes unmanageable or lasts longer than three months, you should seek professional help. For more information, get a copy of the brochure *Recovering from the Emotional Aftermath of a Disaster* on the DSHS Web site.